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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000021

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: IRANIAN ARCHITECT OF SYRIA-IRAN-HIZBALLAH
RELATIONSHIP RETURNS TO DAMASCUS

REF: DAM 4139

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: Iran's incoming Ambassador to Damascus, Mohammed Hassan Akhtari, has returned for his second tour as Ambassador to Syria after overseeing the creation of the Syria-Iran-Hizballah triangle during his first tenure from 1986-1998, according to media reports. Akhtari's appointment comes after a string of public reports of Syria-Iran exchanges, including most recently President Asad's December 21 meeting with visiting Iranian VP Hussein Dahqan and Asad's November 14 meeting with visiting Iranian FM Manouchehr Mottaki. It also follows a December 21 report in Jane's Defense Weekly that the Syrian PM and the Iranian FM signed November 14 an accord guaranteeing mutual cooperation and aid in the event of international sanctions or military confrontation with the West. Akhtari's return signals increased cooperation between Syria and Iran as both countries face international pressure, but the SARG may be making a foreign policy miscalculation about how the USG will react, according to contacts. End Summary.

¶2. (U) President Asad accepted December 28 the credentials of Iran's incoming Ambassador to Syria, Mohammed Hassan Akhtari, who has returned for a second tour as Ambassador after serving from 1986-1998 in Damascus, according to media reports. Most recently, Akhtari had been working in the office of Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khameni, according to the press reports.

¶3. (C) Akhtari's appointment comes after a string of published accounts about Syria-Iran exchanges, including President Asad's December 21 meeting with visiting Iranian VP Hussein Dahqan, Asad's November 14 meeting with visiting Iranian FM Manouchehr Mottaki, and Asad's August 7-8 trip to Tehran (reftel). Other Iranian visitors this year included security authorities and a high-level official in charge of nuclear issues, according to Al-Hayat correspondent Ibrahim Hamidi. Akhtari's appointment also follows a December 21 report in Jane's Defense Weekly that Syrian PM Naji al-Otri and the Iranian FM had signed on November 14 an accord that promises mutual cooperation and aid in the event of international sanctions or military confrontation with the West. (Note: None of our contacts could confirm such an accord and questioned whether Syrian and Iranian authorities would need to put such an agreement on paper.)

¶4. (C) Fouad Sandouk, whose boss Syrian businessman Sa'eb Nahhas has numerous ties to Iran, said Akhtari's return signals increased cooperation between Syria and Iran as both countries face international pressure. The Iranian

government needs Syria and Hizballah to threaten Israel, which Iran fears may strike Iranian nuclear facilities, Sandouk said. Syria needs Hizballah and Iran to keep Israel from moving into Lebanon and as leverage in future negotiations over the Golan Heights, Sandouk said.

15. (C) Hamidi agreed and said Akhtari, who served in Damascus during the Iran-Iraq war, was the architect of the Syria-Iran-Hizballah relationship. Hamidi predicted more economic deals between the two countries and the possibility of a visit by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Damascus, while expressing concern that the SARG is making an enormous foreign policy miscalculation about a possible USG reaction. The SARG has misread the U.S. in the past, thinking that its efforts to secure the Syria-Iraq border would protect it from criticism on its Lebanon policy, Hamidi said. SARG officials may now think that increased cooperation on the Syria-Iraq border will protect them from criticism for its Iran policy, but Syria would be the weakest link in the Syria-Iran-Hizballah triangle, Hamidi said.
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